Fairbury Entrepreneurs Became Early Automobile Dealers

By: Dale C. Maley

The early 1900s saw Fairbury transition from a horse-based system of personal transportation to the automobile. Henry Ford's low-cost 1908 Model T made owning a car possible for ordinary Fairbury citizens, not just the wealthy few. Sensing a huge new demand, many local entrepreneurs quickly established automobile dealerships and related businesses in Fairbury.

William Jennings Bethard was the first Livingston County resident known to own an automobile, although the exact year and model remain unknown. By June 1901, the Fairbury Blade was already noting townspeople driving in “grand style,” such as H. J. Ramsey with his new Stanhope. In the July 4, 1904, parade, only three automobiles appeared, owned by T. S. O. McDowell, Chester Claudon, and W. J. Bethard, which shows how rare cars still were in Fairbury.

In 1907, a statewide license list recorded only 10 automobiles registered to Fairbury residents, nearly all owned by doctors or prominent businessmen, such as banker T. S. O. McDowell, department store owner J. W. Walton, and physicians Dr. Samuel Barnes and Dr. Henry Presler. A typical 1907 automobile cost about $850, roughly equivalent to more than $23,000 in today’s dollars, putting car ownership far out of reach for the ordinary working man. Early Fairbury cars included luxury makes such as White, Stevens-Duryea, Winton, and Cadillac, underscoring how exclusive automobiles were at first.

The First Automobile Dealers Appear

The first known automobile dealer advertisement in the Blade appeared on April 16, 1909, placed by the Fairbury Automobile Company. This dealer emphasized “an excellent line” of cars, highlighting the Chalmers Detroit and the White steamer as cars with a record “for getting you there and returning you in safety to your homes.” The ad also promoted the Halladay line, built in nearby Streator, as a dependable and economical car for local buyers.

To broaden its appeal, the Fairbury Automobile Company listed a wide range of other brands, including Cadillac, Buick, Jackson, Ford, and Pierce-Arrow. The firm promised a full line of supplies, repair and cleaning services, and what it called the "safest and best garage in central Illinois,” where a car could be stored overnight, by the week, or even by the year. These early services helped reassure hesitant buyers that if they took the plunge into automobile ownership, local support and repairs would be available.

Selling Cars And Repairing What Broke

An earlier September 9, 1908, Blade ad from the same Fairbury Auto Co. focused on the constant need for parts and repairs. The dealer bluntly told readers that "if you have some kinds of autos you will need a lot of repairs," then promised to do the work cheaply and in a way that would please the owner. It also boasted that their cars were "dog proof" and

"a joy forever," all while saying they were "jolly good fellows," whether or not they sold you a car.

These light-hearted lines reflected a serious reality, because early automobiles were notoriously unreliable and required frequent maintenance. By openly advertising repair services and supplies alongside new cars, the Fairbury Auto Co. was trying to capitalize on the repair business and to ease the fears of prospective buyers worried about breakdowns on country roads.

A Carriage Company Tries To Adapt

On that same September 9, 1908 Blade page, the Fairbury Carriage Company ran an advertisement of its own, reminding readers that it manufactured Klondyke buggies and carriages and could build “automobile tops” of any kind to order. Many early cars were open to the weather, so a custom top could make motoring far more comfortable on rainy or snowy days. The carriage firm invited people to visit its factory, promising prompt repair work and “perfect satisfaction.”

Over the following years, the Fairbury Carriage Company kept trying to straddle the changing market, continuing to sell horse-drawn buggies and hearses while adding automobiles such as the Michigan 30 and later the Oakland Sensible Six to its offerings. By 1921, the firm sold its West Locust building to Claudon Motors and shifted toward wagon sales and automobile top and curtain repair before eventually closing as the horse era ended.

Fairbury’s Home Grown Automobile

Around this same time, inventor and machinist Joseph Jesse Slagel tried to go a step beyond selling cars by actually building them in Fairbury. Slagel operated a machine shop at Sixth and Locust Streets, where he manufactured small hit-and-miss gasoline engines for farm water pumps. In 1908, the Blade reported on his ambitious plan to build a low-priced motor car that the "ordinary individual" could afford, featuring a two-cylinder eight-horsepower engine, solid tires, and a single seat.

By 1908–1909, Slagel was advertising his Fairbury Motor Car Works and, according to the state license book, had produced at least one car sold to rural mail carrier William A. B. Smith. A rural route was a perfect endurance test, and it is likely that Slagel and Smith struck a deal that gave Smith an affordable car and Slagel real-world testing on country roads. Unfortunately, Slagel's health failed, and he left Fairbury in 1914. No further Fairbury-built cars are known beyond that single documented example.

Reaching New Customers: Women And Families

As more Fairbury residents considered buying cars, advertising shifted to target not just businessmen but also women and families. An April 29, 1910, Blade ad for Rambler automobiles asked readers, "When Mother goes to town," whether she should still spend half the day behind a plodding horse when a Rambler could take her in and bring her home refreshed. The ad claimed that "many women drive the new Rambler" and emphasized that it was easy to operate, safe to start, and quiet and dignified in motion.

The Rambler advertisement also described large wheels and tires, a long wheelbase, and a "Spare Wheel" to avoid tire trouble, all features meant to reassure families traveling on rough country roads. A follow-up ad on May 6, 1910, promoted Rambler prices ranging from $1,800 to $2,500, a sizeable investment that would equal tens of thousands of dollars in today's money. These promotional messages showed how local dealers used comfort, safety, and family convenience to justify the cost of a car.

More Dealers, More Brands, And Support Businesses

By 1911, Fairbury had multiple auto dealers competing for customers. C. J. Claudon, who had earlier been noted as an early auto owner, entered the automobile business and began advertising in the Blade, including the Hudson brand he sold. The July 7, 1911, issue reported 365 horse teams and 37 automobiles parked on Main Street, a vivid snapshot of a town in transition from horses to cars. A month later, the Blade noted about 325 cars gathered at the Pontiac Chautauqua, again underscoring how quickly automobiles were appearing across Livingston County.

In September 1911, a notice in the Blade introduced what can be considered the area's first used-car dealer, a sign that the automobile market had matured enough for trade-ins and secondhand cars. By February 23, 1912, a Ford dealer, J. G. Swing, entered the Fairbury market, bringing Henry Ford's popular Model T into local showrooms. Around the same time, Fairbury saw its first tire dealer and dedicated automobile repair shops, recognizing that early tires wore out quickly and that motorists constantly needed patching, tubes, and other supplies.

New Brands Keep Arriving

The Fairbury Automobile Company continued to add lines as manufacturers competed for rural buyers. In August 1912, the firm announced that it had taken on the Case automobile line, promoting Case as "the car with a name behind it" and comparing Case reliability to "mother's bread" for her children. The ad assured prospective buyers that Case cars were built of the best materials by the best workmen using the most up-to-date methods known to automobile builders.

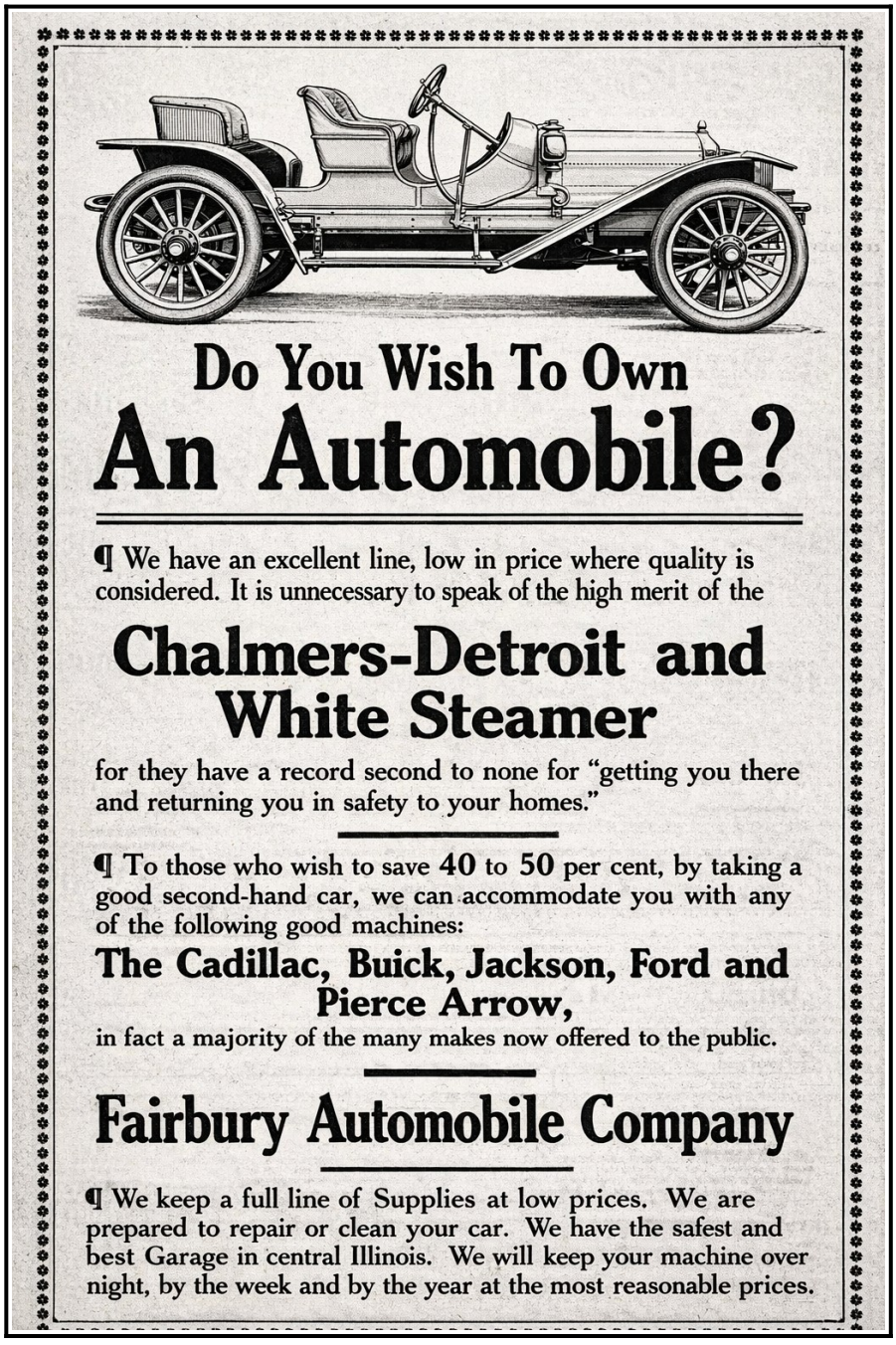
By offering brands such as Chalmers Detroit, White, Halladay, Rambler, Hudson, Ford, Oakland, and Case, Fairbury dealers gave residents access to a broad cross-section of the young American automobile industry. These businesses also created new local jobs for mechanics, salespeople, and parts suppliers, gradually replacing the blacksmiths, liverymen, and carriage makers who had supported the horse economy.

Horses Fade, Automobiles Take Over

In 1907, only a handful of automobiles carried Fairbury license plates, and almost all were owned by the town's most prosperous citizens. By 1917, more than 100 Fairbury-area farmers had purchased cars, although relatively few had yet bought tractors, which shows how much more quickly the transition happened in town than on the farm. A 1907 state motor vehicle law and the rapid growth of registrations through 1919 mirrored what

Fairbury residents were seeing on their own streets: more cars, fewer horses, and a completely new way of getting around.

By about 1920, horses had virtually disappeared from the streets of Fairbury, and many of the old backyard barns had either been converted to garages or torn down. Farmers held on to their teams much longer, but by roughly 1940, internal combustion tractors had finally pushed horses off most farms in the Fairbury area as well. As with every major technology shift, Fairbury businesses that recognized the change and adapted—like the carriage builders who started selling cars, the hardware merchants who added Ford dealerships, and the entrepreneurs who opened garages and tire shops—survived and sometimes prospered, while traditional horse-based firms faded into local history.


Do You Wish To Own
An Automobile?
¶ We have an excellent line, low in price where quality is considered. It is unnecessary to speak of the high merit of the
Chalmers-Detroit and White Steamer
for they have a record second to none for "getting you there and returning you in safety to your homes."
¶ To those who wish to save 40 to 50 per cent, by taking a good second-hand car, we can accommodate you with any of the following good machines:
The Cadillac, Buick, Jackson, Ford and Pierce Arrow,
in fact a majority of the many makes now offered to the public.
Fairbury Automobile Company
¶ We keep a full line of Supplies at low prices. We are prepared to repair or clean your car. We have the safest and best Garage in central Illinois. We will keep your machine over night, by the week and by the year at the most reasonable prices.